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THE GREAT

Mississippi Flood

OF 1874.

ITS EXTENT, DURATION AND EFFECTS.

A CIRCULAR FROM

MAYOR WILTZ,

OF NEW ORLEANS,

TO THE

MAYORS OF AMERICAN CITIES & TOWNS

AND TO THE PHILANTHROPS THROUGHOUT THE

REPUBLIC, IN BEHALF OF

SEVENTY THOUSAND SUFFERERS

IN LOUISIANA ALONE.

NEW ORLEANS:

PICAYUNE STEAM-BOOK AND JOB PRINT, 66 CAMP STREET.

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MAYORALTY OF NEW ORLEANS.

NEW ORLEANS, MAY 30th, 1874.

On the 25th instant, the kind favor of the Western Union Telegraph Company enabled me to send to the Mayors of thirty-four large American cities the following dispatch :

“By request of Relief Committee and leading citizens, I again call on American cities in behalf of fifty-four thousand victims of the great flood, for such aid as your prosperity may permit or your philanthropy prompt you to grant. Contributions in cash and provisions in thirty-five days have been less than one hundred and eighty thousand dollars. In fifteen days our means will be exhausted. The demand for relief will continue great and urgent for many weeks. Daily rations have been distributed to about forty-five thousand—eight thousand furnished by the Government. Painful anxiety as to the results is general.

“Nothing but large increase of resources for relief can prevent the horrors of famine and great loss of life. We need a million of dollars more. Details will be given by mail.

LOUIS A. WILTZ,
Mayor and Treasurer of Relief Fund.”

To give the information promised, to extend the appeal to many other cities and to towns and corporate institutions, to enlist the aid of philanthropic journalists and to lay before the members of the national legislature a statement of facts for their guidance, I issue this circular, with the hope that the great and increasing distress and danger in which the inhabitants of the overflowed regions now are may thus be made more widely known and the situation better understood.

The Mississippi River in average high water from Memphis to the Gulf is confined by artificial banks or levees to a channel, varying from half a mile to a mile in width. But for these embankments the unparalleled flood of this year would have formed, for all this distance, a continuous lake, covering the whole alluvial country, from twenty-five miles to one hundred and seventy-five miles in width, and more than six hundred miles long. But in spite of these levees, considerably more than one-half of this area has been submerged. The levees could not withstand the Mississippi in its mighty and ruthless violence, and they gave way in numerous crevasses, varying from one hundred to five thousand feet in width, aggregating fully six miles. Through these great chasms the flood has been pouring since the 15th April, in a stream seven feet in average depth and at the rate of more than seven miles an hour. More water is even now flowing from the great river over the farms and plantations of Arkansas, Mississippi and Louisiana, than falls over Niagara. This outflow must continue until the river recedes below its natural banks, an indefinite period. In some years high water has lasted a long time. In

1858 the river remained at its maximum 87 days and in 1859 at Vicksburg, 129 days. The flood of 1874, is higher than either, or than any on record.

The vast area of the overflow is estimated as follows by Wm. J. McCulloh, Esq.: formerly and for many years United States Surveyor General for Louisiana, a practical engineer and especially familiar with the inundated districts.

"I estimate the area submerged by crevasses, and overflow by high and back water, to be in *Louisiana* about 8,035,000 acres, or 12,600 square miles. It is impossible, in many places, to define the line of separation between the crevasse and overflow water—the former soon reaching the flat land mingles with the latter.

"This overflow extends over all, or nearly all of each of the following parishes: Carroll, Madison, Tensas, Concordia, Avoyelles, Point Coupee, West Baton Rouge, Iberville, St. Martin, larger part of New Iberia and of St. Mary, Terrebonne, larger part of Lafourche, Ascension, St. Charles, St. John Baptiste, Jefferson, St. Bernard, part of Plaquemine, Morehouse, Richland, Catahoula, Franklin, Caldwell, Ouachita, and St. Landry.

"Were it not for the levees, the whole of the lands west of the Mississippi river, with a belt say of 35 miles from the Arkansas line to Red River—those west of the Atchafalaya, with a breadth of 15 miles from Red River to the Gulf—all from Red River to the Gulf west of the Mississippi river and east of the Atchafalaya—and all east of the river from Baton Rouge to the sea—these including a large part of the cotton region and very nearly all of the section cultivated in rice and sugar, and embracing the city of New Orleans, *would be annually submerged*, being about one sixth of the area of the State, and the most fertile and valuable part of it.

"In Mississippi the submerged district is about 2,500,000 acres, and with the exception of a narrow depth of high land fronting the Mississippi river, has an average width of about 30 miles, and a length of 130 miles, stretching from Alcorn's landing, in Coahoma county, to Vicksburg, being in that county; in Bolivar, Sunflower, Washington, Issaquena and Warren counties, and comprising what is known as the Yazoo and Mississippi Delta, bounded on the east by the Yazoo river, and the highlands, about 15 miles east of the Sunflower river, in the very heart of the richest cotton region of that State.

"In Arkansas the overflow from opposite to Memphis to Helena (about 100 miles direct) has an average width of 40 miles, being all of the county of Crittenden, part of St. Francis and of Phillips; and from Helena to the Louisiana line, has an average width of 30 miles, being part of Arkansas and Desha counties, and all of Chicot. In the interior, it covers part of Ouachita, Calhoun, and Union Counties, bordering on the Ouachita river, and has on either side of the White and Arkansas rivers a width of 20 miles. As nearly as I can estimate, the overflowed portion of Arkansas would be about 2,000,000 acres."

W. J. McCULLOH.

In Louisiana.....	8,065,000
In Mississippi	2,500,000
In Arkansas	2,000,000
	<hr/>
	12,565,000 acres.

The inundation, beginning two months ago, reached enormous and alarming proportions by April 16th, continued spreading until May 15th, and only began to show signs of receding about May 20th. Several weeks must pass before the now submerged lands become tillable, perhaps one-third by June 20th, one-third more by the 10th July, the remainder in some indefinite time longer and too late for any crop this year.

As to the condition in which the subsiding flood will leave the sufferers, I quote from a recent published letter of the Hon. J. M. Sandidge, of our Relief Committee, who hears or reads the appeals of the distressed and who is well acquainted with the overflowed region and the situation of the inhabitants.

The few mules, horses and cattle preserved from the flood will be unfit for any immediate service, and must continue to live, if they live at all, upon the leaves, moss and cane tops, until such time as the grass can grow again.

The people, with nothing now, will have no more when the water subsides, and cannot have until the land can be made to yield its fruits. How are they to be fed and supported until such time?

Death by famine on the dry, but barren ground, would be quite as terrible as to have been swallowed up in the waters!

The Relief Committee see and understand all this, and it is a source of the most sickening anxiety to know that they will be impotent to avert what seems inevitable. The people, as rapidly as possible, and under whatever circumstances, hardships and sacrifices, must begin quickly to make arrangements for themselves by engaging, for food and raiment alone, to work, wherever work on such terms can be had; and if not to be had in their present neighborhoods, to seek it in more distant places, if able to reach them. It is true that a great part of the most helpless and destitute would be, by such policy, left where they are, to live upon public charities, or perish in the swamps.

Nothing less than \$1,000,000 in supplies will enable these people to re-commence and continue to labor where they are, until the earliest products of the soil can give subsistence, and if not sustained to that extent who shall say what crimes may not be committed, if crime it could be called, in the desperation of these starving thousands, thrown upon communities, now barely self-supporting? This is a gloomy picture truly, but it is best always to look dangers straight in the face, and see them in their full proportions, if they are to be averted. However generous the people of the country, and of the cities and towns might be, adequate relief from such quarters, could not be depended on; there can be no sufficient aid extended, except through the bounty of the General Government.

The contributions in money to our relief fund amount to about one hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Donations in provisions from Western cities received before May 29th were, 585 barrels of flour, 218 sacks flour, 54 barrels crackers, 13 half-barrels crackers, 239 barrels meal, 41 boxes crackers, 79 barrels pork, 74,631 pounds bacon, 23 barrels beef, 76 barrels beans, 41 barrels potatoes, together with a shipment from Lexing-

ton, Kentucky, of 25 barrels flour, 29 barrels of meal, 900 pounds bacon, 14 sacks of potatoes, 2 barrels sugar, 2 bales and 1 box merchandize, 2 boxes shoes, 1 box clothing. The list of donations includes many valuable articles not above given, consisting of garden seeds, cotton seed, seed corn, clothing, &c. Extensive shipments of provisions have also been announced from Cincinnati, making the total value of donations for relief, not cash, about thirty-five thousand dollars.

Up to May 22nd, there had been received from the U. S. Commissary, 608 barrels pork, 1864 barrels army bread, 112 barrels beans, 658 barrels meal, and 87,092 pounds bacon. From this source are obtained 8000 daily rations, which will be continued until June 15th, or longer.

Our total shipments to May 29th, were:

1,767 barrels pork.....	471,200 rations.
271,132 pounds bacon.....	361,509 “
7,512 barrels meal.....	1,201,920 “
3,782 “ crackers.....	321,470 “
922 “ flour.....	163,194 “
279 “ beans.....	418,500 “
59 “ seed potatoes—175 sacks of salt.	
470 sacks cotton seed—700 sacks seed corn.	
19 cases garden seeds—16 cases drugs and sundries.	

Our committee have been shipping supplies thirty days, ending May 29th, averaging 56,219 rations daily which have subsisted at least 70,000 people, the local agents, of distribution having been instructed to reduce their *per capita* issues. With this economy we cannot continue relief to the above numbers with only our present resources beyond the 15th of June.

Be not deceived by the falls which may take place in the Mississippi, and be reported from time to time. The waters of the overflow do not drain off by the river's channel nor return to it, but flow to the Gulf of Mexico along the great lake above described. The cultivated lands in the Onachita and Atchafalaya valleys or basins are from five to fifteen feet below the level of the natural banks of the Mississippi. When the river has fallen ten feet the corresponding fall of the flood waters is not ten inches. The great inundation will subside not faster than one or two inches each day, uncovering the land by degrees so slow and tedious as to weary the hopes and sicken the hearts of the owners and tillers of the soil.

I have given and described, as nearly as reasonable limits will permit, the cause, the nature, the extent, the consequences and the probable duration of the flood. I will let this statement have what effect it may upon the moral sense, the philanthropy and the magnanimity of the American people. I could give details and incidents, a few out of thousands of the same nature that would produce emotions of pity and horror. Such is not my purpose. I show you what is needed to prevent intense misery, famine and death; I leave the rest to your honor as men, to your pride as Americans and to your sense of duty as Christians. While there are such

fruits of prosperity and such stores of accumulated riches, you cannot afford to let it be recorded in our common history that thousands of people in 1874 STARVED TO DEATH on the borders of the Mississippi, for the want of one fifty thousandth part of the aggregate wealth of their countrymen.

I append an interesting letter of Hon. Henry G. Crowell, Commissioner of Relief from Boston, for further information and in testimony of the faithful, systematic, vigorous and effectual operations of our Committees of Relief.

LOUIS A. WILTZ, Mayor,
Chairman of General Relief Committee and Treasurer of Relief Fund.

LETTER OF HON. HENRY G. CROWELL, }
New Orleans, May 16th, 1874. }

HON. LOUIS A. WILTZ, MAYOR:

Dear Sir—I arrived here on the 11th instant, bearing credentials as Commissioner of the Mayor of Boston and of the Boston Committee in charge of subscriptions for the relief of sufferers in Louisiana by the flood. I came for the purpose of ascertaining what further assistance the citizens of Boston can render towards alleviating the necessities of the suffering, and restoring your ancient prosperity. I was immediately put in communication with the members of the General Committee of Relief, appointed by you, with those of the several subsidiary committees, and with many intelligent citizens, from whom and from eminent professional engineers I made diligent enquiry as to the area of the country overflowed, the number of people made destitute by this stupendous calamity, the extent of damage to crops and live stock, the probable continuance of the inundation, the nature and amount of relief absolutely necessary to prevent loss of life by famine, and as to the plan of relief adopted here.

I am grieved to find the overflow to be wider in extent, more disastrous in effect, and causing distress and destitution to far greater extent than represented by you in your first appeal for aid from the chief cities of the Union—greater than is generally believed and greater than can be conceived of by those not familiar with the nature of the vast flat alluvial region which the waters of the Mississippi and its lower branches now cover. The calamity surpasses in extent and ruinous consequences any that has occurred from fire, storm or flood on this continent during the current century.

To see for myself the nature of the great inundation, I went to Brashear, eighty miles west of New Orleans—the last twenty-three miles through an unbroken flood which pours from the distant crevasses on the Mississippi, and devastates an immense region. I shall not here relate what I saw, but it was sufficient to give me a realizing sense of the magnitude and destructiveness of the great flood, and of the reasons why the suffering, destitution and danger caused by it, must continue for a long time.

I have made careful examination of the workings of your committees of relief, which I am pleased to find composed of citizens of high character and distinguished ability, who labor zealously and constantly in the noble work to which you have called them. Their method of purchasing and forwarding supplies, and their rules and regulations for the distribution of relief met my approval in all respects. By the system adopted the donations of the charitable are sure to do the most good to those who are made destitute by the flood. Wise precaution is taken to avoid the encouragement of idleness by strictly withholding relief from such as find work on lands not overflowed, and who refuse to labor; a precaution which I commend and approve. Careful, systematic economy is employed in all relief measures.

At their request and yours, I have examined your accounts as Treasurer of the relief fund and the accounts and vouchers of the committees, finding all correct and in order. By a well organized system everything received is properly accounted for and promptly applied. I am pleased to say that you and the members of your committees have shown much executive and administrative ability, and that the disposition of contributions has been so careful and so judicious as to merit entire confidence.

You have done and, I am sure, will continue to do all that can be done for the sufferers with the means which the philanthropic put in your hands. I can suggest no improvement in your method.

I cannot close without advising you to renew your appeal for help. Your resources for the required relief are altogether insufficient. Put before the people of America the leading facts relating to this unprecedented and enormous visitation of calamity. A true knowledge of the great danger and suffering of your afflicted people will awaken wealthy and prosperous States, cities, churches and associations to an active sense of their duty. While there is such prosperity and abundance of means everywhere else, these poor victims of the flood must not be left to starve.

Please accept for yourself, and extend to all others whom I have met here, my thanks for the very many courtesies and kind attentions which I have received at your hands and theirs.

Hoping to visit you under more prosperous auspices, I remain

Yours very respectfully,

HENRY G. CROWELL.

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